

Book reviews

Guidelines on the Termination of Life Sustaining Treatment and Care of the Dying

A report by the Hastings Center, 159 pages, New York, £14.50, The Hastings Center, 1988

It is not often that a book on ethics is practically helpful to those that read it. This is one such. In the preface, the authors commit themselves to providing 'comprehensive ethical guidelines' and that is precisely what they do. The text is printed clearly and the non-reflective paper makes it easy to read. Do not be put off by a first impression that the layout is akin to the assembly instructions of a piece of furniture from a DIY store. Only a little perseverance is needed to feel comfortable with its geography. However, the recommendation that the guidelines should 'be read in their entirety in circumstances that permit reflection and discussion' is more difficult to accept. The main reason for this is the excellence of the contents. The overwhelming impression is of the careful, studied distillation of a great deal of practical clinical experience. Many statements, such as 'Malnutrition and dehydration ... are not the same as the felt states of hunger and thirst' and 'the degree of invasiveness of a procedure should not determine the need for consent' appear deceptively simple.

The result is a provocative challenge to much of what we have accepted as appropriate practice in patient care, and a sometimes uncomfortable realisation of the extent to which habit can take the place of reasoned thought. Having made the reader question, there is help with the problems that may have arisen as a result. The discussion of the rights

and duties of carer and cared for are particularly valuable, with emphasis on what is reasonable, the need for teamwork, the value of involving patient, family and/or friends in the decision-making process and the importance of forward planning with clear documentation. Although this book is American, and considers aspects of patient care not yet established here, the discussion of such topics as reimbursement incentives, costworthy care for the dying, and 'living wills' will be valuable preparation for dealing with changes that may well occur in our own health-care systems before too long.

This is a book that will be of great value to all members of the caring professions, whether they be doctors, nurses, social workers or ministers of religion. As the authors state early on, it should not be thought of as an oracle providing easy answers to dilemmas but rather as a catalyst for thought.

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COMET: A Computer Program dealing with Consent to Medical Treatment

Paul Sieghart and John Dawson.
Available from Professional Division,
British Medical Association,
BMA House, Tavistock Square,
London WC1H 9JP. Inclusive price
£45 for the IBM PC version or £30 for
the Amstrad PCW version (£30 & £20
respectively for Associate Members of
the BMA), 1987.

This is the first time I have been asked to review a computer program in

medical ethics. This is not surprising because 'so far as the authors are aware it is the first attempt anywhere to devise an "expert" computer system in any area of medical ethics'.

The program was introduced and described in a paper in the *Journal of Medical Ethics* (Sieghart P, Dawson J 1987; 13: 185-188). Its name, COMET, is an acronym for Consent to Medical Treatment and its scope is restricted to that field. Other ethics programs are in the minds of the authors and one on medical confidentiality is currently being developed. I suppose I was a little disappointed when after running my first real-life case I was given the signal 'That concludes this session. Press any key to start another' and then found that the next case had to be on the same topic. I should have realised this from the name of the program, the extent of which is limited by technical reasons such as capacity. So we are concerned only with consent to treatment under varying circumstances. The range of conditions is very wide and guidance is offered at the tap of a key as to the legal and ethical considerations to be taken into account before making any decision. The joint authors are a barrister and an expert in medical ethics. The introductory panels make the limitations very clear - the program 'cannot solve your ethical problems' but will give some guidance and encourage discussion with colleagues and teachers. After the user has worked through an individual case he is given conclusions but even then there is a postscript to the effect that 'You may of course not agree with this reasoning. Remember that this is only a computer program...'. At each stage in the work-up of a case there is the facility of requesting information on the ethical and legal issues involved and of having portrayed on the screen the data which have already been fed into the computer by the user. At the end of any 'session' (as a case is called) a print-out is offered. This sets out all the